

BUSINESS & LABOR

EXHIBIT NO. 3DATE 1-16-07BILL NO. SB 151

Testimony in Support of SB 151: Insurance Coverage for Hearing Aids

Proponent:

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Chairman and Members of the Committee,

My name is Kathy Johnson, and I am the audiologist at the Montana School for the Deaf and the Blind, a position that I have held for 27 years.

In my tenure, I have had the opportunity to see first hand what hearing impairment and deafness can do to a child and their family. Most deaf and hearing impaired children have hearing parents who have little experience with dealing with a handicap such as this.

The exciting thing about my job is that we are now identifying children at birth for significant hearing impairment and we know that early intervention can make an enormous difference in the outcome for these babies and children. The earlier you identify the child and provide amplification and therapy, the better the development of speech, language and critical thinking skills.

Imagine that you are holding your newborn child in your arms and are now ready to take them home with you from the hospital. Now imagine that someone has just told you that your baby is deaf and will need to be fit with hearing aids right away. In addition, to the bills you already have as a young family, you will need to come up with \$600.00 to \$3,000.00 for each hearing aid to help your child.

Now imagine your shock at finding out that this is not covered under your insurance policy.

Most of the hearing aids that you will purchase for your child will only have a life-span of 4-6 years if you are lucky and they don't flush them down the toilet or feed them to the family dog. Then you will need to find funding again.

In all of my years of experience, I have only had 6 hearing aids covered by the family's insurance policy.

Medicaid and Indian Health Services will cover the cost of hearing aids for the children who qualify for these programs, but everyone else will have to come up with the money on their own. Currently, the Montana CHIPS program will not cover the cost of hearing aids. While service organizations help, this is still a significant burden for most families.

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Each year, I do a workshop at our Family Learning Week-end for the siblings of children with a hearing impairment. I usually ask them "What is hard about having a deaf brother or sister?", and write down their answers. I will never forget the little girl who said, "Well, it was hard this Christmas when my Mom and Dad said that we wouldn't be getting as many presents this year because my sister needed new hearing aids." Several other children nodded in agreement.

I know of many children whose families try to eke out another year with a poorly functioning hearing aid, or only one aid because they can't afford to replace the aids they do have.

Recent studies have shown that on a national basis, only about 40 to 48% of adults who could benefit from amplification have a hearing aid.

Cost is often cited as being a significant part of this national problem.

While adults who develop hearing loss later in life do not have the same issues of language development and learning difficulties that children with hearing impairment have, a hearing loss can significantly decrease the quality of life for an adult. One can assume that the 60% of adults that could benefit from hearing aids, but who don't have them, are having issues with communication, isolation, and safety because they can't hear well.

Not only do they suffer, but the family suffers as well. I'm sure all of us have had the frustration of trying to communicate with someone who can't hear you. Even I used to give up when my beloved Grandfather couldn't hear the joke the 3rd time I repeated it.

I urge you to support insurance coverage for hearing aids for all Montanans as a way to provide a quality life for us all.

Thank you very much.